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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001997

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT PURSUES NEW PEACE PROCESS STRATEGY

REF: A. MANILA 1962 (NEW CLASHES IN MINDANAO ARMY REACTS
QUICKLY BUT WITH RESTRAINT)
[1](#)B. MANILA 1940 (ARMED FORCES CHIEF DISCUSSES
MINDANAO CLASHES)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Faced in the last few weeks with serious legal and political challenges to its arduously negotiated Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on territory with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Arroyo government is moving rapidly -- albeit with some confusion -- to cobble together a more viable peace process with the Muslim insurgents. In conversations with the Ambassador, Arroyo Administration Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo, and Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process Hermogenes Esperon laid out the government's hastily revised strategy to salvage as much of the controversial Memorandum of Agreement as possible and suppress rogue Muslim insurgent forces without inciting a broader Christian-Muslim conflict in Mindanao. The key elements of the new strategy include reaching out quickly to a broad array of grassroots communities and organizations to build the kind of support that was lacking for the earlier peace deal. However, these officials emphasized that while the new strategy represented a significant shift in the conduct of negotiations, the government was in no way abandoning the peace process. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Executive Secretary Ermita told Ambassador August 22 that the government was by no means giving up on the peace process. Instead, the government planned to review the current Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which is now in litigation in the Supreme Court, to ensure that it complied with legal and constitutional requirements. The MOA would then be used as a starting point for further negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Ermita explained that the government would pursue a policy of "Disarm, Disband, and Rehabilitate" as its end-game strategy with the Muslim insurgents. Under this framework, Muslim insurgents would be given an opportunity to give up their arms, withdraw from their base commands, and join livelihood programs, much as was done with Moro National Liberation Front insurgents in a 1996 peace agreement. Ermita stressed that giving up arms was not a precondition for negotiations, but an outcome of reaching a peace agreement. Ermita noted that the government was taking the MILF leadership at their word that the MILF elements taking part in current fighting against government forces were not under central control. Nonetheless, Ermita noted that the government was proceeding with drawing up arrest warrants for these rogue elements.

NO ALL-OUT WAR

13. (C) To reinforce the government's commitment to a negotiated settlement while vigorously confronting any insurgent attacks, Ermita issued a strongly worded statement from President Arroyo that sought to allay fears that the government was going to launch an all out war against Muslim insurgents, or abandon the peace process. In the press statement, issued August 21, President Arroyo emphasized that military and police forces were strictly adhering to her directive to bring specific MILF commanders to justice, while restoring security to central Mindanao and avoiding civilian casualties. Arroyo's statement came on the heels of a noticeable up-tick in rhetoric, both in the media and among political leaders, that the government should widen the fight against the MILF for their "terrorist actions." Arroyo stressed her belief that the peace process is not "defined by armed groups alone, but by all communities and sectors concerned," and that armed rebellion does not have a place in the Philippine democracy. The President also addressed humanitarian concerns, saying that the military and police had been instructed to work closely with local government officials and community leaders in affected areas to ensure the delivery of social services and relief supplies.

CREATING CONSENSUS FOR PEACE

14. (C) In an August 22 breakfast meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Secretary Romulo had earlier outlined the Administration's plan for moving forward toward a viable

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peace agreement in Mindanao. Romulo commented that it had become clear to the government that the MOA currently stalled in the Supreme Court would no longer suffice as written. He mapped out President Arroyo's new strategy to neutralize rogue MILF elements while concurrently reaching out to grassroots communities, NGOs, and religious organizations, both Christian and Muslim, in order to build consensus for a peace deal. Romulo expressed hope that the government's plan would begin to bear fruit within a month, giving the government the opportunity to begin talks anew with the MILF. He made it clear that the government was dissatisfied with the Malaysian Government's role, both as facilitators of the peace process and as leaders of the International Monitoring Team (IMT), and suggested that the Government of Brunei would step forward to fill the void in the IMT.

15. (C) Ambassador underscored to Romulo the fundamental importance of a peaceful and prosperous Mindanao, stressing that good faith negotiations towards a peace agreement were vital. She urged care on the part of the government to avoid turning the heretofore isolated military clashes (ref A) into a broader struggle with the MILF that would derail the peace process, cost more lives, and damage more communities. Ambassador also expressed her hope that Muslim insurgents who had voluntarily surrendered would be treated according to the law, as any other Philippine citizen would be treated. Romulo acknowledged the importance of the Ambassador's points and expressed regret that various commentators had criticized the U.S. role in the peace process in recent reports, calling the arguments a "red herring."

MILF CREDIBILITY SUFFERS

16. (C) Also on August 22, Peace Process Advisor Esperon told Ambassador that he believed the government's plan to reach out to grassroots communities, NGOs, and religious organizations in Mindanao was a good start, though he doubted that they, or anyone else would be able to pressure the MILF to come to the negotiating table. He opined that the MILF had lost significant credibility because of the unprovoked attacks on civilians by some of its forces and expressed confidence that Chief of the Armed Forces General Alexander

Yano would ably bring the situation to a peaceful end.

17. (C) In an August 20 conversation, Cotabato City Mayor and Muslim leader Muslimin Sema told the A/DCM that he felt the situation had stabilized over the past several days. Sema believed that there had been "too much overreaction by our Christian brothers . . . fear is taking hold," but recognized that there were many "hotheads" among the MILF. Sema was not sure whether the Central Committee actually controlled the MILF rogue commanders. He offered that the situation could be defused if the government were even slightly more conciliatory in its statements. However, he worried that that more hawkish elements of the Philippine government and the Armed Forces would dominate the government's approach.

AMBASSADOR URGES RESTRAINT

18. (C) During the last two weeks, the Ambassador has underscored at numerous public events the importance of resolving conflict through negotiation, rather than violence. Repeatedly asked by the media about the role of the U.S. government in the peace process, the Ambassador continued to emphasize that while the U.S. supports peace, prosperity, and development in Mindanao, the U.S. is not a signatory to the MOA, nor is the U.S. a party to peace negotiations. The Ambassador observed that the U.S. does not support independence for Mindanao, a consistent policy for more than 100 years. In private meetings with key government officials, including Foreign Secretary Romulo, Executive Secretary Ermita, and others, Ambassador reemphasized these points.

COMMENT

19. (C) At this point, the current peace process framework has broken down. It is clear that the government and the MILF failed to build a consensus for the Memorandum of Agreement among the Philippine public at large. A notable error was significantly expanding the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, thus fostering the appearance that the government

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was forfeiting security and constitutional powers to Muslim insurgents. Sensing this failing, critics and opponents of the Arroyo Administration in general, and the peace process in particular, used the opportunity to bring the issue to the politically susceptible Supreme Court, which immediately stopped the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement. While the lack of consultation with the Philippine public and the appearance of capitulation to the insurgents were problems that alone would have been difficult to overcome, they became insurmountable when rogue elements of the MILF mounted gruesome isolated attacks over the past two weeks that left dozens of civilians dead and incited the anger of the Philippine public across the board. Nonetheless, the government appears determined to rectify its mistakes and while the MILF may find it difficult to return to the negotiating table, their weakened military state may leave them no other alternative.

KENNEY